

## FROM THE SEA

Mark R. Shulman

**George W. Baer.** *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890–1990* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994. 532 pp. Notes and index. \$49.50.

**Jack Shulimson.** *The Marine Corps' Search for a Mission, 1880–1989* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. xii + 274 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00.

Just over a century ago, the United States became a sea power, changing its basic strategic orientation in the course of a few years. Already a world-class agricultural and industrial producer, the United States joined the great power ranks only when it developed a military force capable of projection across the seas. That capability quickly helped to create an overseas empire and then played pivotal roles in both world wars.

This fundamental shift has been explained by “realist” or “revisionist” historians as a continuation of the zeal to fulfill a manifest destiny, variously to spread democracy or capitalism. Still, it is only recently that historians have attempted to understand the lever of that shift. Put bluntly, the U.S. Navy—more than any other single institution—has altered the world’s destiny, and yet it has received less careful historical study than have the villages of eastern Massachusetts. Baer and Shulimson go a long way toward rectifying the relative neglect of the U.S. Navy and its adjunct Marine Corps.

Jack Shulimson, head of the histories section at the Marine Corps Historical Center, has written several histories of the corps’ experience in the Vietnam conflict. In *The Marine Corps' Search for a Mission, 1880–1898*, he looks back at the professionalization of the Marine Corps in the era between Appomattox and the new century. From the late 1700s, the corps had provided ships’ guards for naval vessels and honor guards for legations across the globe. As the U.S. Navy professionalized in the 1880s, the status of the corps came under close scrutiny. Navy officials came to see the marines as redundant enforcers—which they were—and attempted to have the corps abolished.

In terms of quality, the corps was on shaky ground. By law, the number of officers was already limited to seventy-five, and it was only in the 1880s that

naval academy graduates were included among them. As late as 1894, the promotion rate was so slow that some officers petitioned the secretary to support legislation "that would permit the promotion of captains who had forty-one years of service" (p. 138).

The marines had done themselves no favors. Their ranks were filled with the lowest elements of maritime society: illiterates, liars, drunkards, and ne'er-do-wells—and these were the officers. Shulimson describes the predicament of the unsavory second-ranking officer. In 1894, Col. James Forney "stood trial before a general court-martial, charged on four accounts, from embezzlement, to lying, to using and issuing false papers, and finally to 'culpable inefficiency in the performance of duty.' Despite Forney's foibles," Shulimson writes, "he still held the sympathy, affection, and even a modicum of respect of many of his contemporaries" (p. 137). The enlisted men were far less reliable, and annual desertion rates generally ran to about 25 percent.

Far more damning for the corps, however, was its lack of mission. During the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, it had proven poor at policing labor—a role for which the militia was far better suited and situated. On board ships, naval officers found that sailors policed themselves at least as well as marines could. Furthermore, naval officers would only allow their marines to man the secondary guns, securing the adored main batteries for the sailors. Then, in what should have been the final insult added to injury, even the beloved bandmaster John Philip Sousa left the Marine Corps Band in 1891.

To keep the corps alive, to preserve and possibly even enhance their positions, some officers started to carve a niche within the emerging imperial navy's power projection mission. After all, they said, marines had landed on the shores of Tripoli in 1805. Eighty years later, they assaulted Colombia's Panamanian isthmus to quell a rebellion. But it was not until the invasion of Cuba during the Spanish-American War that the marines began to gain prestige as a result of their performance at landing and fighting in unfriendly territory.

This new and important role evolved not because of improvements among the officers and men. They were still liars and drunkards (although by 1898 literacy rates had improved). Instead, the Marine Corps was revived because of a near-paralyzing interservice rivalry between the army and the navy: the army would not attack positions to protect naval vessels, and the navy would not risk its vessels to better position the army's landing. The marines, however, would take orders from naval officers. Thus was born the professional amphibious assault mission.

It is at approximately this point that George Baer picks up the story. Baer is the author or editor of several works on international history, focusing in particular on the conflicts between Italy and Ethiopia. For the past several years, he has served as chair and Alfred Thayer Mahan professor of the

Strategy and Policy Department at the Naval War College. When the Naval War College opened in 1884, its primary mission was to teach the history and strategy of naval warfare—a mission enhanced when Mahan, its first professor, published his lectures as the best-selling *Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (1890). Even today, this remains the essential mission of the college. However, the twentieth century has taught us a great deal about the limitations of sea power as well as its potential influence. Foremost, Baer notes, strategy is only worthwhile when it is practiced in sympathy with national policy. Baer presents us a solid and balanced interpretation of the historical intersections of national policy and naval strategy over the past century.

*One Hundred Years of Sea Power* enters a field already growing crowded. After decades without a scholarly survey, the past several years have seen the publication of several important surveys, including Kenneth Hagan's now standard *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* (1991), which Baer's book complements nicely; Robert W. Love, Jr., *History of the United States Navy* (1992); Stephen Howarth, *To Shining Sea: A History of the United State Navy, 1775–1991* (1991); Nathan Miller, *The U S. Navy: A History*; and Robert O'Connell, *Sacred Vessels: The Cult of the Battleship and the Rise of the U S Navy* (1991). Among these, Baer's work stands out as a prudent and focused study of naval policy.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the navy transformed itself. Traditional commerce raiding and coastal defense had been based on wooden frigates that cruised for years on distant stations, safeguarding American interests mostly at the hands of nongreat powers. For this role, the tough frigates, officers, and men were well suited. Navalists like Theodore Roosevelt, James Russell Soley, and Mahan, however, conceived of a mission for the United States as a great power itself. Taking advantage of favorable budgetary circumstances, an international social climate that fostered zero-sum notions of international cooperation (the geopolitical side of Social Darwinism sometimes called "realism,"), and an upsurge in American interest in powerful, steam-driven machines, the navalists politicked for a great fighting fleet. By the mid-1890s, they had achieved their blue-water revolution.

Between 1898 and 1917, the navy continued to build along Mahanian lines. Baer cuts through the sometimes bitter literature to demonstrate carefully the ways in which the battlefleet served its political masters—the American people. Occasionally his balanced treatment seems even too politic. "From the beginning, the war with Spain was a joint operation, with each service supporting each other. At Cuba and the Philippines, the Navy's control of the sea isolated the enemy and enabled the Army to assault his land and dislodge his ships" (p. 29). At a certain level this is true; soldiers might not have made it to the Philippines without naval escorts, nor could the navy have conquered

the islands without troops. Still, Baer's account contrasts with Shulimson's discussion of the rancorous interservice rivalry that characterized these efforts.

Nonetheless, the victories at Manila and Santiago seemed to prove everything Mahan had argued. "After 1900 the United States had an empire to maintain and a growing international naval competition to contend with. For a country in such circumstances, what better symbol of national pride and naval strength could there be than that sea-power marvel, the puissant battleship?" (p. 33). For nearly twenty years, the navy would continue to build consecutive generations of the world's largest battleships, calculating national vigor in their number and gun size. The most pressing strategic problem was that it had to be a two-ocean navy, a stretch made by only one other fleet—the formidable Royal Navy. In comparison, either possible opponent, Germany or Japan, would fight only on one ocean. Mahan's strategy required concentration of forces, so the U.S. fleet remained in the Atlantic until Germany was thoroughly defeated.

Other histories, most notably Robert O'Connell's *Sacred Vessels*, have lambasted the navy for failing to prepare for the submarine operations of World War I. Yet, the U.S. Navy was no more top-heavy than the navy of Britain, or France or Japan for that matter. The navy had to protect the coastline against invasion, and in the first couple of decades of this century, this meant being able to thwart a battlefleet—preferably away from American ports. Even after World War I, the blue-water enthusiasts who ran the navy considered submarines as defensive weapons, first for the coasts and later for the fleet. Still, the fundamental strategic problem was already beyond the means of the military to solve. The political leaders had committed to defending not just the continental Pacific coast, but also that of the Philippines, some five thousand miles away. The archipelago offered few strategic advantages and the cost of defending it was far higher than the military budgets allowed. Still, successive administrations did nothing to resolve the conundrum. Neither the army nor the navy was given resources adequate to defend the Philippines, nor were they allowed to forget the American obligation to protect the archipelago. The peace of Versailles only partially remedied the problem, by allowing the battleships to move to the Pacific.

The Washington Conference of 1921–22 was the diplomats' effort to resolve the strategic dilemmas and the Republicans' attempt to create a new world order, one structured by balances of power and a status quo, and one that would not overextend American sea power. After much diplomatic haggling by navalists to undermine the conference, the great powers were able to hammer out three treaties that promised to provide order and balance, while cutting the cost of defense. Peace lasted for less than two decades.

The strategic dilemma of two overextended and contending powers led to

war in the Pacific in December 1941. The ideology of neither side allowed for withdrawal, and the cultural differences would not allow accommodation. Both the Imperial Japanese and the U.S. navies agreed on the importance of Mahanian notions of sea power. Their great contest eventually led to several "decisive" battles, although these were fought on previously inconceivable scales with carriers designed to support battleship-dominated fleets.

Refreshingly, Baer's interest in the juncture between strategy and policy means that he does not tender yet another operational history of the war. Still, he does show how forty years of policy planning and strategic development played out on the seas. Noting that War Plan Orange was unplayable, Baer shows the strategic acumen of Chief of Naval Operations Ernest J. King. Coordinating what resources he had with his political and military commitments across the globe, King devised and started to implement his new strategy by March 1942. "An early offensive from the south would relieve pressure on all other Pacific areas, including Hawaii and Alaska and 'even India,' King told Roosevelt" (p. 212).

This quick adaptation of strategy to policy requirements afforded the United States time to build up the necessary men, machines, material, and know-how to take the offensive toward the Japanese home islands. King, and indeed the navy, quickly embraced aircraft carriers as the new capital ships but the planners also learned quickly the advantages of joint operations. Despite tensions between Douglas MacArthur's Southwest Pacific and Chester Nimitz's Pacific theaters, the cooperation was remarkable and won the Japanese war in three and a half years.

Baer tracks the navy through stormy waters in his notable chapters on the Cold War navy. His interpretation, based mostly on the best previous studies, will not surprise the specialist. It shows the drift of a navy that was no longer the nation's first line of defense or even its strategic force. Atomic bombs, with the air force to deliver them, altered the nation's strategic posture dramatically between 1945 and 1961. President Eisenhower's "New Look" relied on the land-based bombers to deliver a massive atomic strike to devastate the new Soviet enemy. Denied deep-strike delivery systems, the navy floundered for much of the fifties. Finally, President Kennedy returned to the navy a critical role in his Flexible Response. Especially under the leadership of Adm. Arleigh Burke, the navy yet again experienced renaissance, developing a new strategic strike capacity with its ballistic-missile-firing submarines, as well as carving out crucial roles in diplomacy and strategic doctrine.

By the early seventies, however, the navy had ebbed again, lacking much of a combat role or political leadership. Baer notes,

In the 1970s the Navy's coercive and expensive sea-power doctrine, its interest in a war of attrition, fit less and less the policies of a post-Vietnam America. The

Navy's close adherence to heavy-carrier doctrine, and the resulting definition of sea power, put the service in a double bind. It could not detach its central doctrine from a weapons system that had lost its credibility, a system that the Navy's political masters had declared irrelevant. The divergence of dominant Navy thinking from national policy was a recipe for disaster (p. 415).

The Soviets picked up that gauntlet, but they could not afford to play the game as long as the Americans. They challenged the American military superiority at sea, a game they were not likely to win. Under Reagan, the Mahanian zealot of a secretary, John Lehman, responded to the Soviet challenge and attempted to resurrect a decisive role for conventional naval battles with his maritime strategy. Baer notes, "the maritime strategy was not put into the service of specified political goals. It did not relate naval fighting to national war aims. Nor could it, for the country had none" (pp. 438-39). The Lehman era makes quite explicit the inertia of sea power; if the nation did not provide political goals, then the navy would simply attempt to grab "more"—more platforms, more roles, and eventually more missions.

Thus, these books and maritime policy come full circle. A century ago the corps and the navy developed strategies during a time of policy drift. Today, with the end of the Cold War, both sea services are in strangely familiar situations. In such a setting, these two important studies gain further immediacy.

Shulimson tells an important, but not completely new story. Much of the same material is covered in Allan Millett's *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (1980, 1991) and also in an uncited doctoral dissertation, Nathan Prefer's *Uncertain Mission: The Role of the U.S. Marine Corps in National Defense, 1880-1947* (1985). Furthermore, some recent works, especially Craig Cameron's *American Samurai: Myth, Imagination, and the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941-1951* (1994), contribute to understanding the Marine Corps at individual and strategic levels.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the Marine Corps will probably survive by continuing to demonstrate the type of mission flexibility so capably described by Jack Shulimson.

Naval and Marine Corps history is still something of a backwater within the historical profession. The fact that only a handful of non-Defense Department colleges or universities employ naval historians may reflect the low standing of the field, but it likely also shapes the writing of history. Nonetheless, the DoD-employed historians, writing on their own time, have produced incisive, balanced histories that explain the key juncture between policy and strategy. They are moving the literature far beyond the old categories of "realist" or "revisionist" to a new synthesis. As such, both works deserve to be read by American historians seeking to understand the most expensive and strategically significant institution of the past century.

*Mark R. Shulman is the author of Navalism and the Emergence of American Sea Power, 1882–1893 (1995) and coeditor of The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World (1994)*

1. For citations on most recent U.S. Navy and Marine Corps history, see Kenneth J. Hagan and Mark R. Shulman, "Mahan Plus One Hundred: The Current State of American Naval History," in John B. Hattendorf, ed., *Ubi Sumus? The State of Naval and Maritime History* (1994), pp. 379–415. See also Hattendorf, ed., *Doing Naval History* (forthcoming), in particular the chapters by Jon T. Sumida and David Alan Rosenberg, "Men, Money, and Machines," and Shulman, "Hitting the Target: Reflections on Doing Naval History."

